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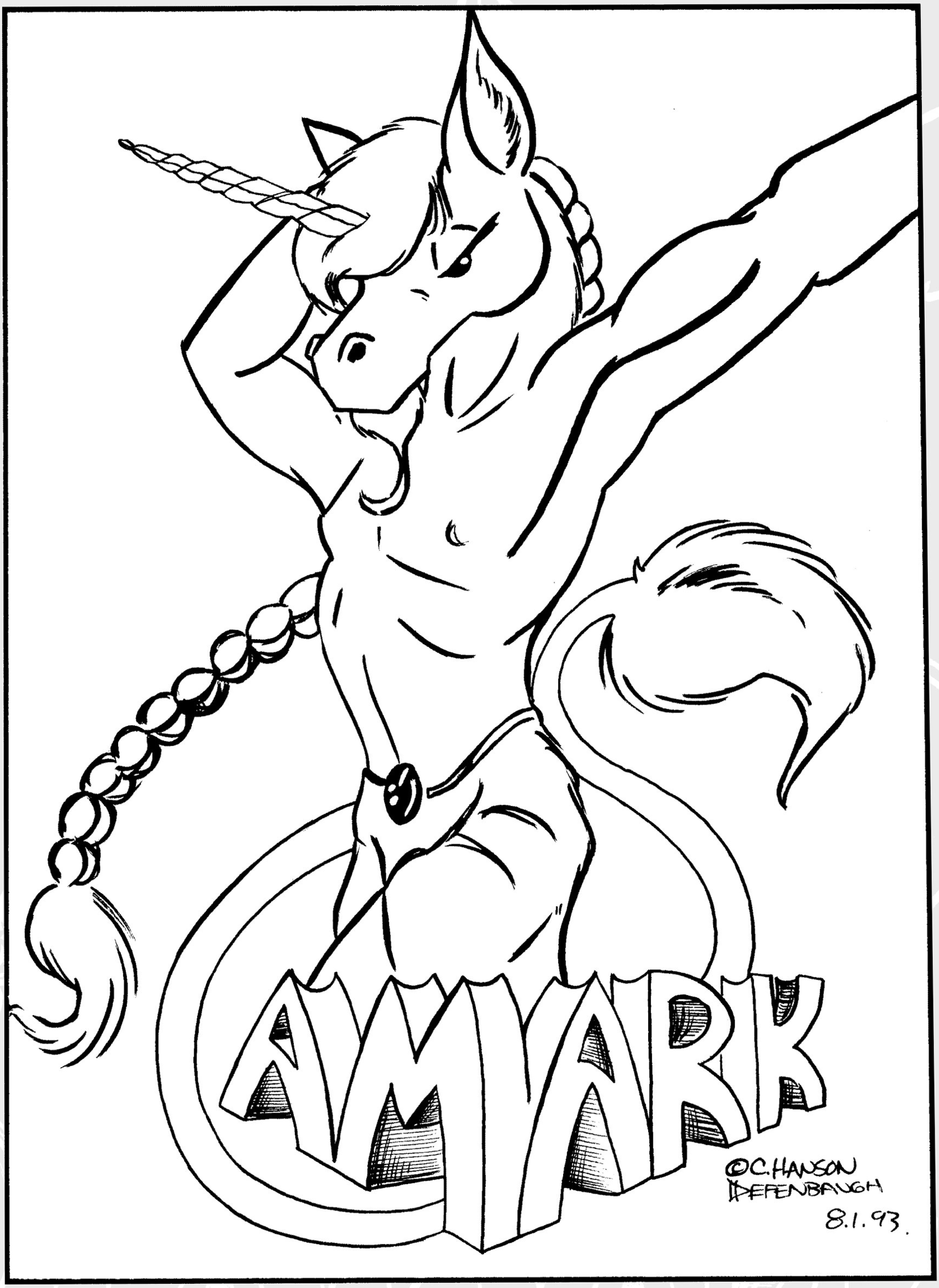
ISSUE 5

SMUDGE • GARCIA



ISSUE 1

VOLUME



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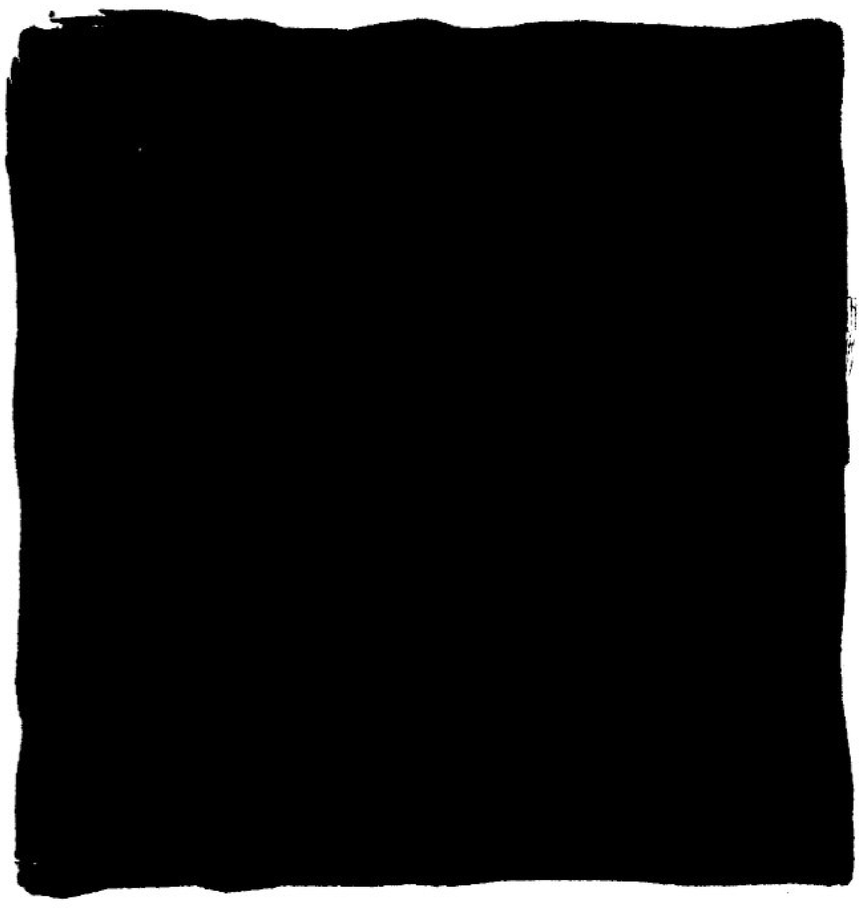
"Now go, and steal me fresh jam!"

Bureau of Mana Investigation

Chapter 5

SMUDGE - ED GARCIA

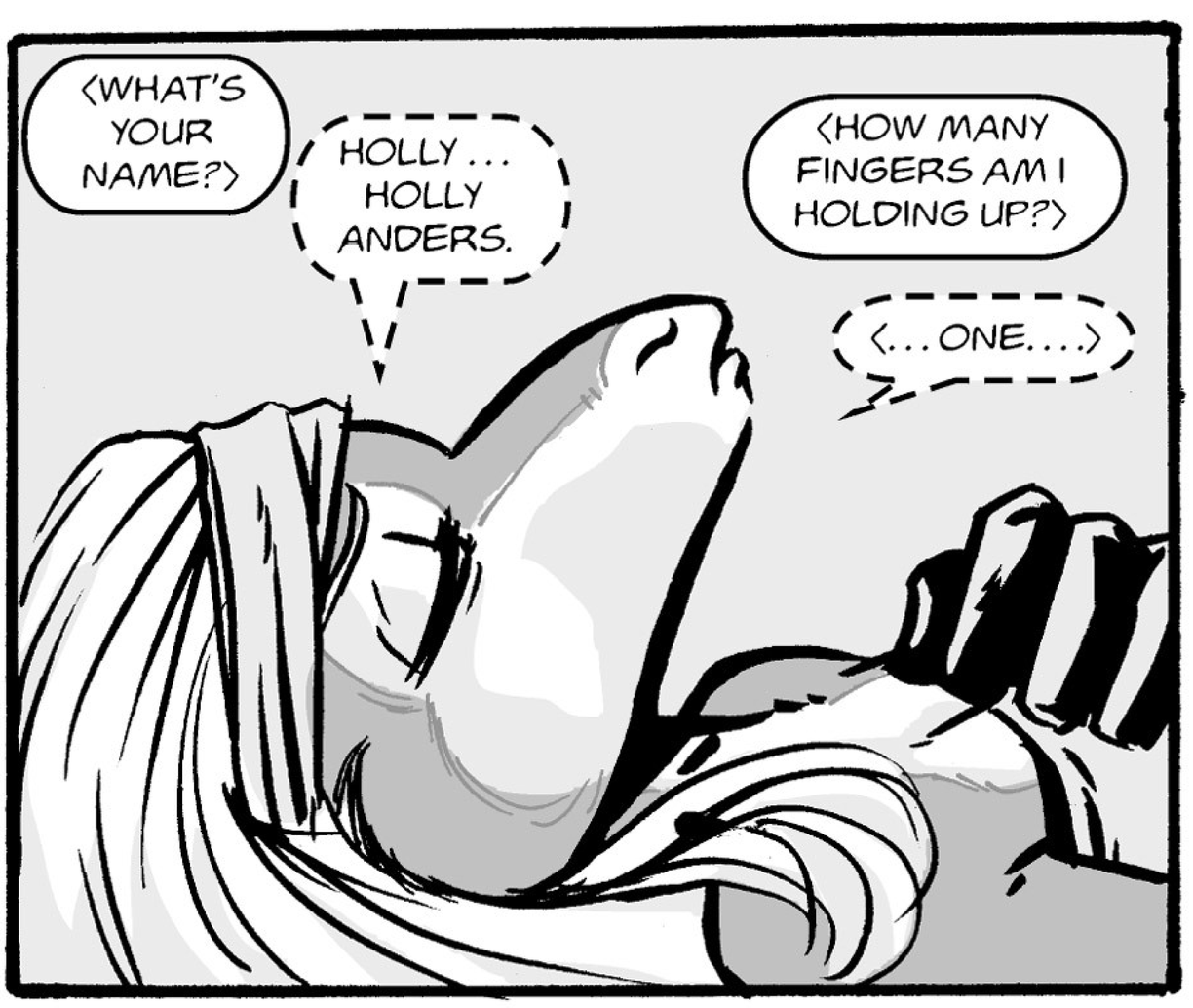
BACK COVER - RICHARD BECKER
GUEST ILLO - PAUL DEFENBAUGH




〈HELLO THERE.〉


〈IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU AWAKE.〉


〈WHERE...〉
〈YOU'RE IN MY HOME. HOLD STILL.〉


〈WHAT'S YOUR NAME?〉
HOLLY... HOLLY ANDERS.
〈HOW MANY FINGERS AM I HOLDING UP?〉
〈...ONE....〉


〈YOUR HEAD INJURY WASN'T NEARLY AS BAD AS I FEARED.〉


〈FORTUNATELY, SOMEONE WAS ABLE TO START HEALING IT RIGHT AWAY FROM THE LOOKS OF IT.〉
〈HEALING...〉


AMARK!

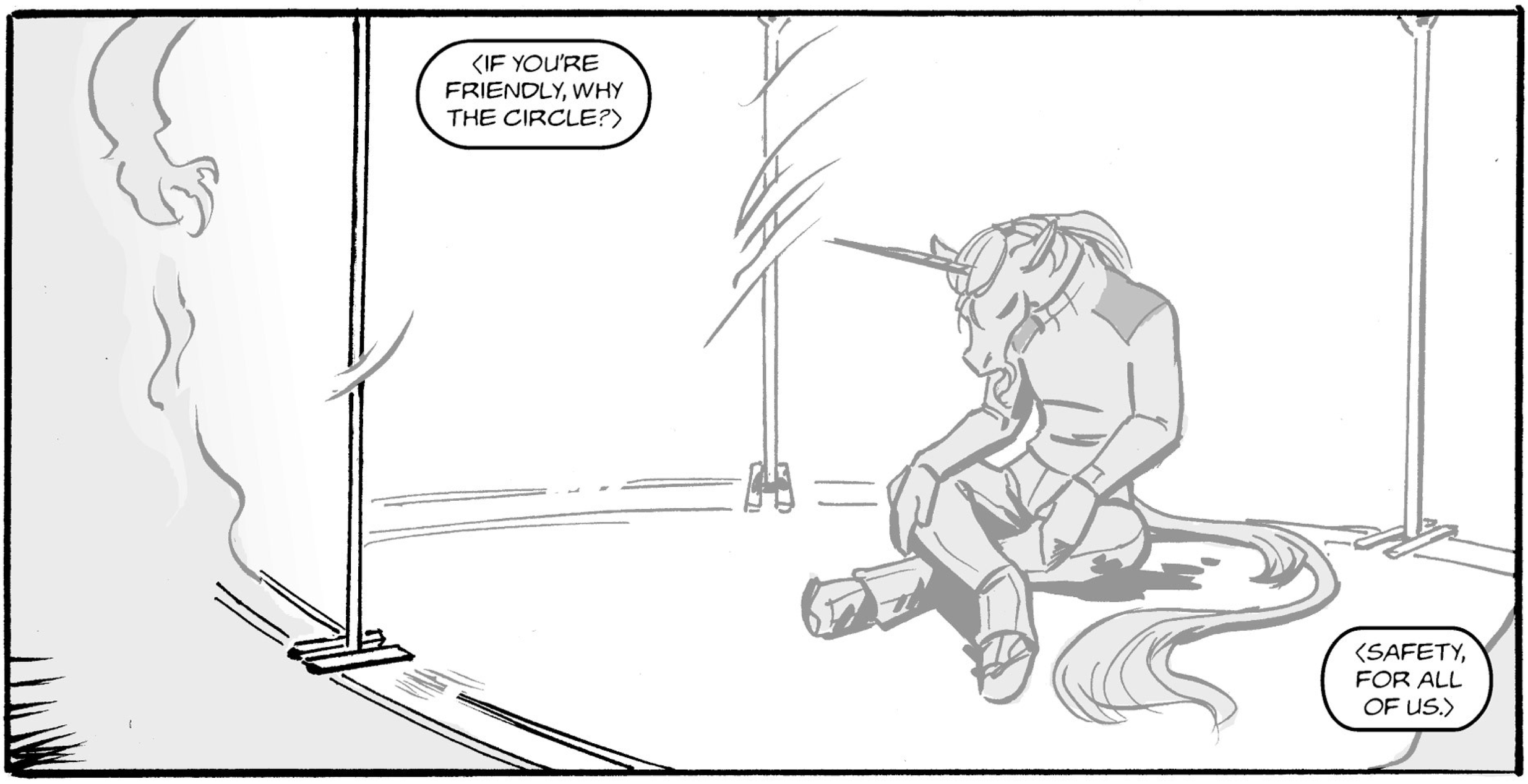

〈WHERE'S AMARK!?〉


〈WHOA, PLEASE! YOU'RE NOWHERE NEAR READY TO MOVE AROUND!〉


〈BUT AMARK?〉
〈YOUR UNICORN IS FINE.〉


〈NOW, PLEASE LIE BACK DOWN.〉
〈I'LL BRING YOU SOME BROTH.〉


〈BUT WHY . . .〉
〈HE'S JUST EXHAUSTED. GIVE HIM TIME AND HE'LL WAKE UP ON HIS OWN.〉
〈HE MUST HAVE BEEN EXPENDING MANA LIKE MAD.〉


〈IF YOU'RE FRIENDLY, WHY THE CIRCLE?〉
〈SAFETY, FOR ALL OF US.〉

<KEEP SEARCHING!>

<THE BODY'S GOT TO BE HERE SOMEWHERE.>

<DAMN IT!>

<WHERE IS HE!?!>

<IF I DON'T PRESENT LORD SHEILBA THAT UNICORN'S HEAD, I'M TOAST!>

<TARLOÖM! LORD SHIELBA REQUIRES YOUR REPORT IMMEDIATELY.>

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL....


〈WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?〉
〈NEVER MIND.〉


〈IF YOU NEED ME, I'LL BE AT THE HIGH PALACE.〉


〈AH, TARLOÖM.〉
〈JUST THE SUCCUBUS I WANTED TO SPEAK TOO.〉


〈LADY OF TIPPIKARRIE. WHAT DO YOU WANT?〉
〈YOUR COOPERATION.〉
〈WHY? WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?〉


〈FREEDOM FROM SHEILBA'S WRATH.〉
〈I'M LISTENING.〉


〈THANKS FOR THE HAND, TAHEE.〉
〈I'M STILL NOT GOOD ON MY FEET.〉
〈IT'S NOT A PROBLEM.〉


〈I'M JUST AMAZED AT YOUR RECOVERY BY KÖLORSHA'S HERBS.〉
〈WELL, I THANK YOU TWO FOR THAT TOO.〉


〈WHERE IS KÖLORSHA?〉


〈SHE'S TAKING CARE OF OUR SON RIGHT NOW.〉
〈A BOY, EH?〉


〈AND HOW OLD IS HE?〉
〈6 MONTHS, WITH ANOTHER ON THE WAY.〉
〈WELL, AREN'T YOU JUST THE STUD.〉


〈UH-HUM, WELL....〉
WOBBLE


AMARK! YOU'RE AWAKE!
YAWN

OH, THANK GOD YOU'RE OKAY.

I WAS WORRIED ABOUT YOU.

HOW'S YOUR HEAD?

JUST ABOUT HEALED, THANKS TO YOU AND KÖLORSHA.

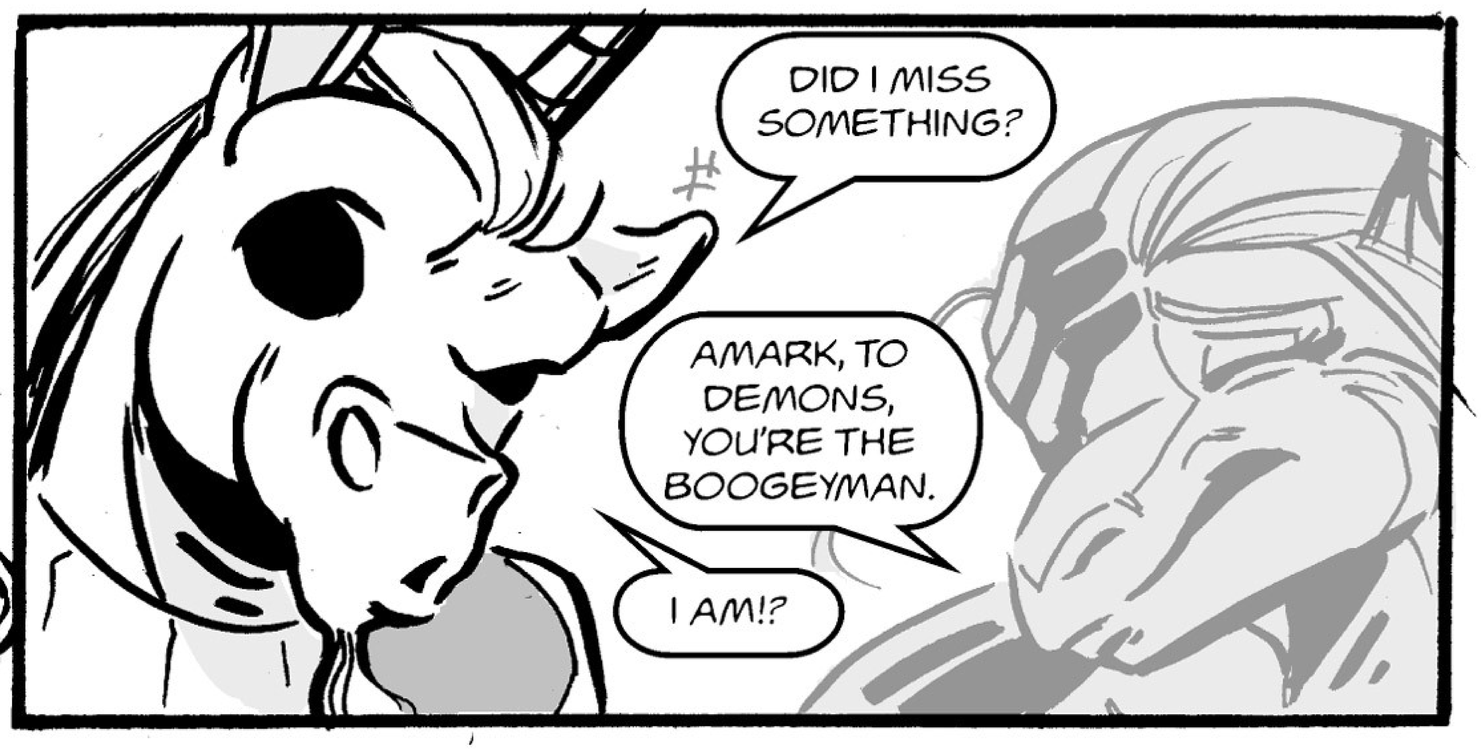
PRAISE BE FOR SMALL MIRCALES.

<I SUPPOSE I SHOULD THANK YOU, INCUBUS.>

<I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU SUMMONED ME HERE, BUT IN DOING SO, YOU SAVED BOTH OUR LIVES.>





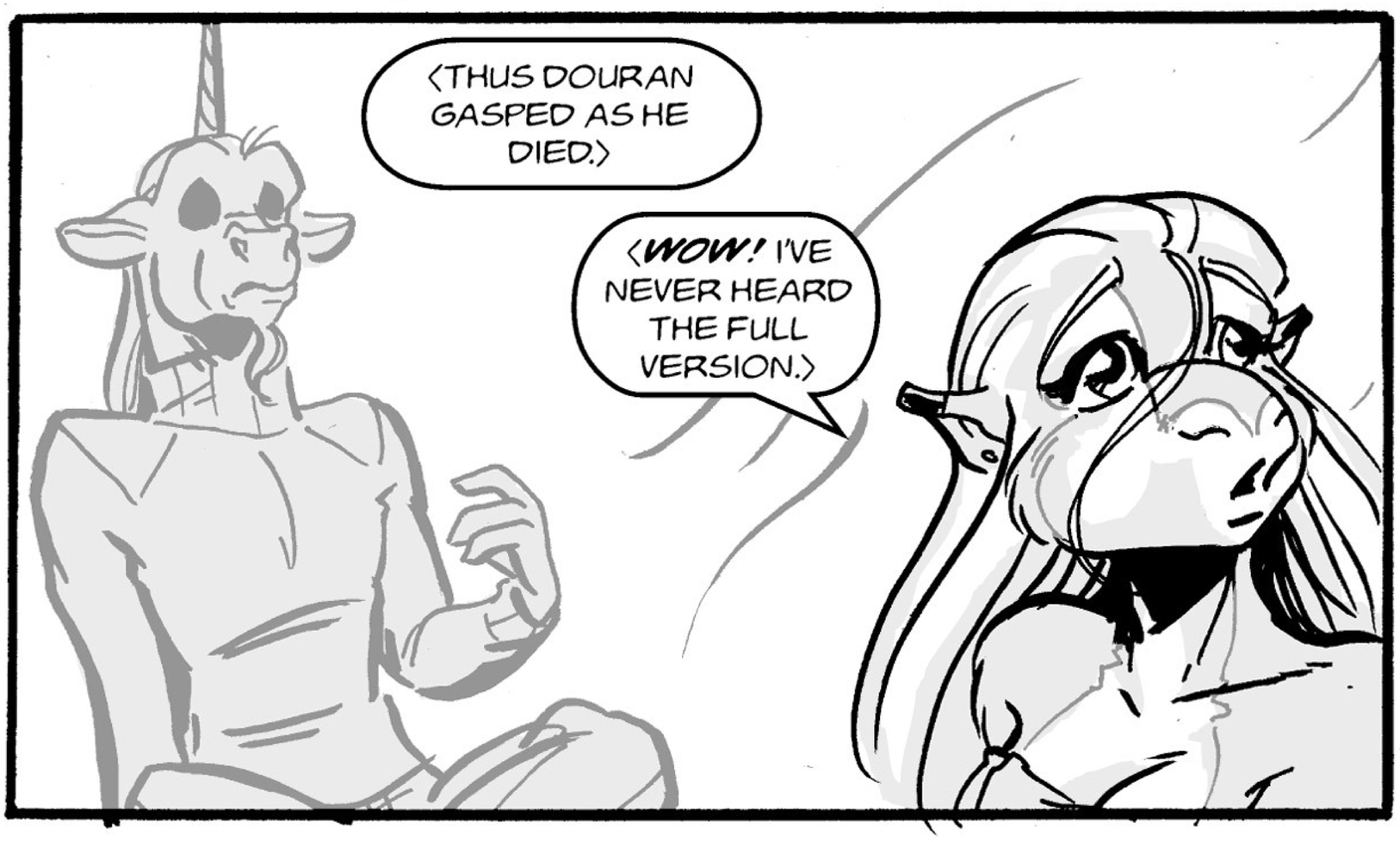


〈SOMEONE BETTER EXPLAIN THIS ONE.〉

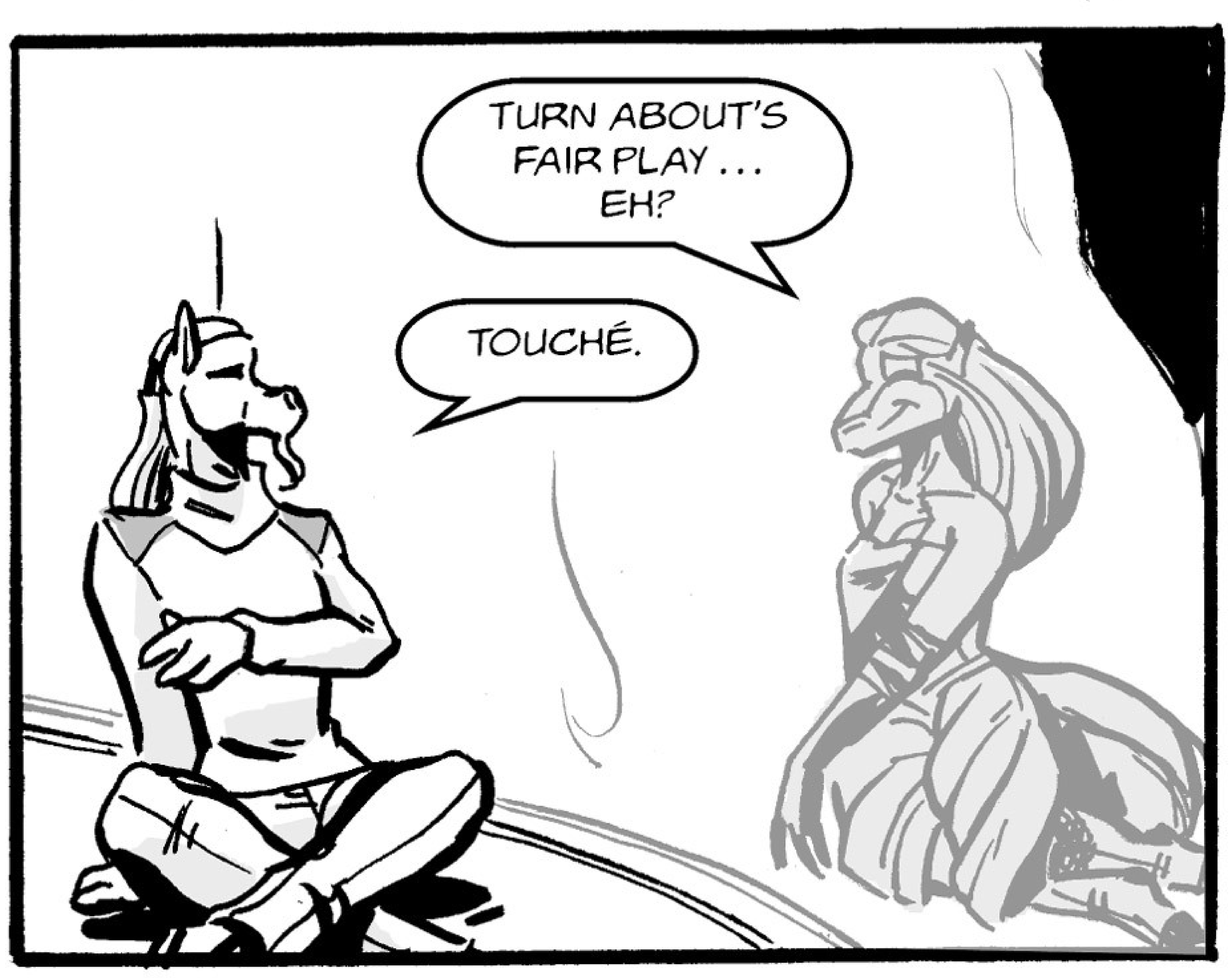
〈AS IT IS WRITTEN IN THE HOLY SCROLLS OF KALISHKA,〉

〈"BEWARE THE TWO-LEGGED UNICORN, FOR HE SHALL BE NO HEALER. FEAR THE BEING WITH ONE HORN, AND THE DESTRUCTION THAT EXISTS IN HIS WAKE. THE WORLD SHALL PETRIFY AND DIE SCREAMING UNDER HIS HOOVES AS HE AND HIS HERD STRIDE ACROSS THE LAND, SLAUGHTERING THE GODDESS AS THEY GO."〉

〈"AND THOSE WHO ARE RIGHTEOUS SHALL CEASE TO BE AS IF THEY HAD NEVER BEEN BORN."〉


〈THUS DOURAN GASPED AS HE DIED.〉
〈WOW! I'VE NEVER HEARD THE FULL VERSION.〉


I'M NOT THE BOOGEYMAN, I'M THE ANTI-CHRIST....
SLAP


TURN ABOUT'S FAIR PLAY ... EH?
TOUCHÉ.

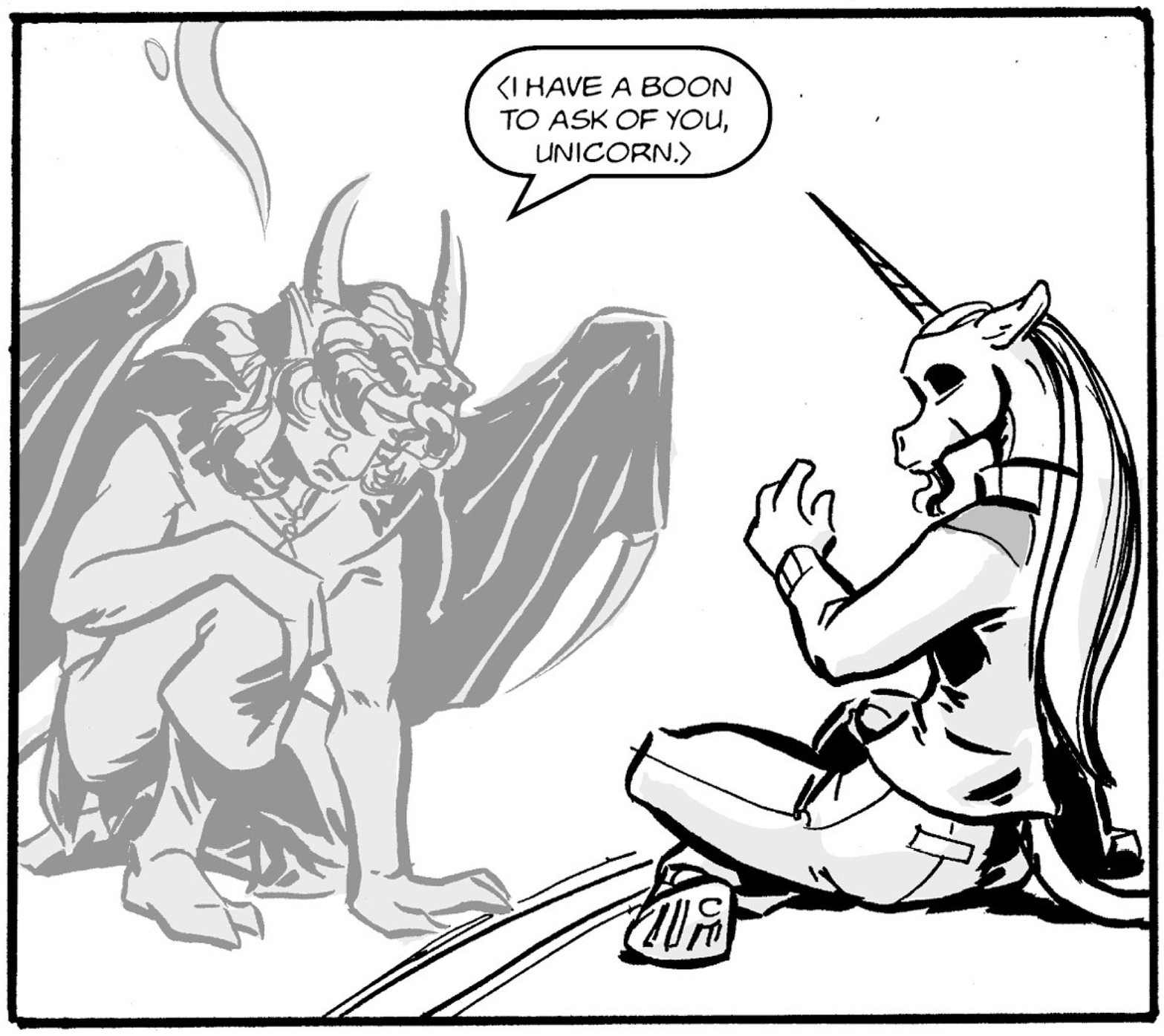

〈DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT?〉


〈I DO NOT PUT MUCH FAITH IN THE MAD-GODDESS.〉


〈BUT I ALSO CAN'T DENY THE POSSIBILITY OF IT BEING TRUE.〉


〈ONE MUST TREAD WITH CAUTION THE PATH OF PORTENTS.〉


〈AND YET, ARMED WITH THAT KNOWLEDGE, YOU STILL SUMMONED ME.〉
〈WHY?〉


〈I HAVE A BOON TO ASK OF YOU, UNICORN.〉


〈PLEASE TAKE US TO YOUR WORLD. IF NOT ME, AT LEAST MY WIFE AND CHILD. . . .〉


〈THAT'S WHY?〉
〈YES.〉


〈WE BEG YOU, UNICORN. THE LONGER I REMAIN HERE, THE MORE IN DANGER MY LIFE BECOMES..〉


〈PLEASE. . . .〉

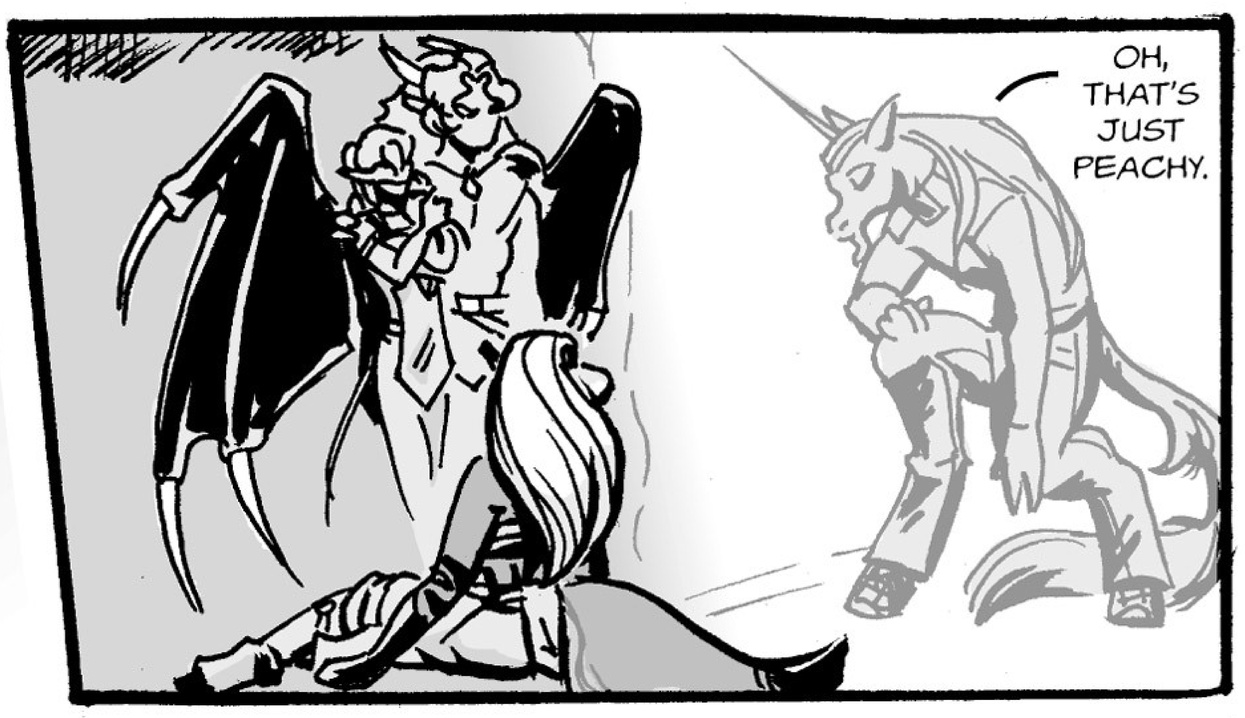

≥SIGH≤
〈UNFORTUNATELY, YOU ASK FOR SOMETHING I CAN'T PROVIDE.〉


〈THINK ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT.〉
〈HOLLY AND I HAVE BEEN HUNTED TO HELL AND BACK, BARELY ESCAPING WITH OUR LIVES. DON'T YOU THINK THAT WE WOULD HAVE LEFT THIS CRAZY LAND IF WE COULD?〉


〈HOLLY AND I WERE BROUGHT HERE AGAINST OUR WILL. WE NEED HELP IN ORDER TO LEAVE.〉


〈TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, ALL MY CONTACTS WITH THE UNDERGROUND ON THIS SIDE SEEMED TO HAVE DISAPPEARED.〉


〈LORD SHEILBA'S BEEN HUNTING THEM AS OF LATE. THE UNDERGROUND HAS EITHER SCATTERED OR GONE HIDING VERY DEEP.〉


OH, THAT'S JUST PEACHY.

〈AND JUST BECAUSE YOU GET TO NIVARRIA DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN STAY.〉

〈IF YOUR GOVERNMENT RUNS BY DRACONIAN LAW, OURS OPERATES UNDER PAPER GRIND.〉

〈THE APPROVAL FOR CITIZENSHIP COULD TAKE MONTHS, SOMETIMES YEARS.〉

〈THERE ARE THINGS WE *CAN* DO IN THE MEANTIME, BUT IT'S NOT A GUARANTEE.〉

〈IT'S BETTER THAN NOTHING AT ALL. . . .〉

〈BUT FIRST WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF THESE DEMON LANDS.〉

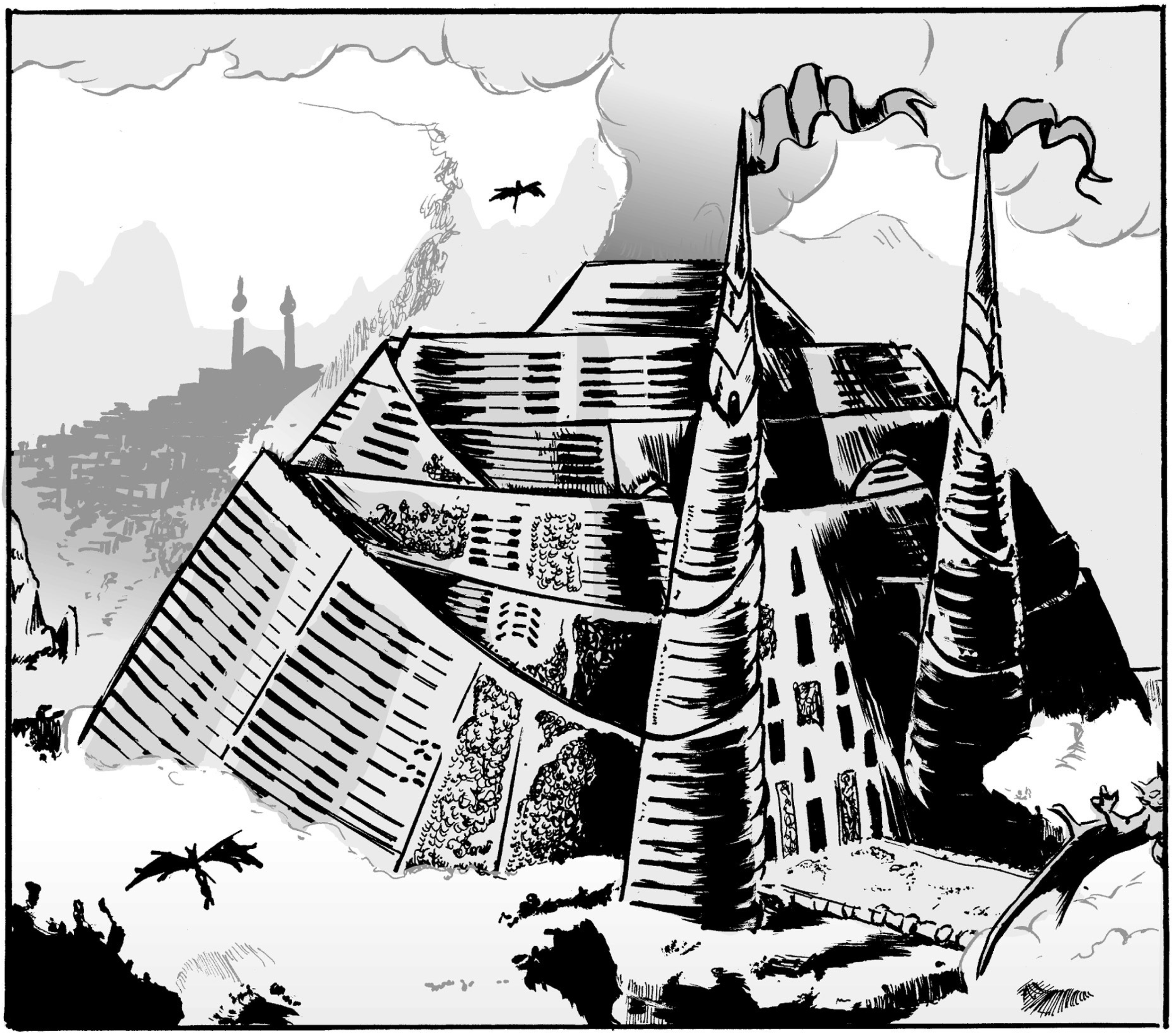
〈I'M WILLING TO *TRY* TO HELP YOU, IF YOU'RE WILLING TO HELP US.〉

〈DEAL?〉

〈DEAL.〉

PIFF

PIFF




〈IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?〉
〈YES, CHILD.〉


〈YOUR STUNT WITH THE FIRESTORM, WHILE QUITE EFFECTIVE, LEFT YOU WITH NO PROOF FOR LORD SHEILBA.〉
〈WE NEED TO FABRICATE THAT "PROOF" NOW.〉
≯HEH≮

<I STILL DON'T GET WHY YOU'RE HELPING ME.>

<I HAVE MY REASONS.>

TYTHUS, IS THE SACRIFICE READY?>

<YES, MY LADY. WE WERE LUCKY THAT THIS NIGHTMARE WAS INJURED IN THE FIRESTORM.>

<YES.>

<KALISHKA WILL BE PLEASED WITH THIS OFFERING.>

<WAIT HERE AND WATCH SILENTLY.>

<FINE BY ME.>

AAaRrREeeeeeEEEE

<O four-legged animal with sapient mind, I release the bonds on your power.>

<To be as I choose!>

<Reform. Reshape.>

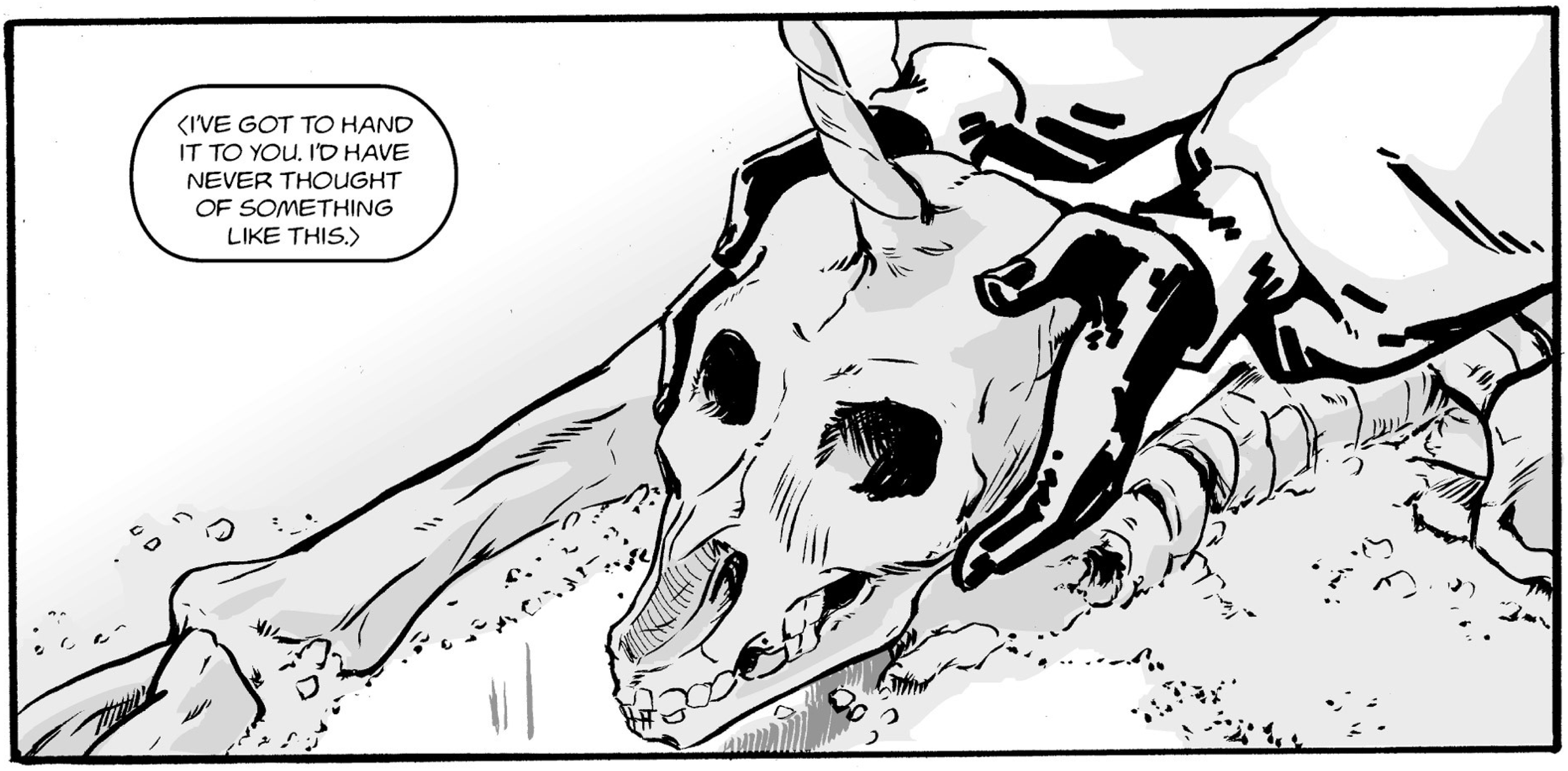
SNORT!

<The power is yours...>


〈VERY NICE.〉


〈WHAT DO YOU THINK, TARLOÖM?〉
PANT
PANT


〈THAT SHOULD WORK FINE!〉
〈GOOD.〉
WHOOOSHHH
SNAP!


〈I'VE GOT TO HAND IT TO YOU. I'D HAVE NEVER THOUGHT OF SOMETHING LIKE THIS.〉


〈THAT'S WHY I'M THE LADY AND YOU'RE THE HENCHMAN.〉


〈HERE. AN OFFERING TO KALISHKA, AND AN OFFERING FOR SHEILBA.〉


〈YOU DO KNOW THAT THE GODDESS HAS *NOT* ACKNOWLEDGED THE DEATH OF THE REAL UNICORN.〉
〈OH, YES.〉
=HEH=

DANG! THESE GRIMOIRES ARE WORSE THAN COMPUTER APPLICATION MANUALS....

(refrance From)

Illumination

On the Art of Turning One's Self Blue

Illumination

Why one would want to turn one's self blue is beyond me, however, but since many of my colleagues insist that this is an important spell one must learn I have included it withing the pages of this text.

Illumination

THEY TELL YOU HOW TO DO THE SPELLS...

...BUT NOT THE THEORIES BEHIND THEM....

<DRINK?>

<THANKS.>

<I'M STILL NOT SURE WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.>

SIP

<TAHEE, YOU'RE NO SMALL MAGE. WHY CAN'T YOU JUST OPEN A GATE YOURSELF? I THOUGHT THAT'S WHAT UBI DID.>


〈FUNNY YOU SHOULD MENTION THAT . . .〉
〈THOSE WHO GATE DON'T DO IT BY KNOWN SPELL.〉
〈THEY TAP A CRYSTAL RUNE EMBEDDED DEEP INSIDE THEMSELVES.〉


〈AND LORD SHEILBA CONTROLS THIS STACK OF CRYSTALS?〉

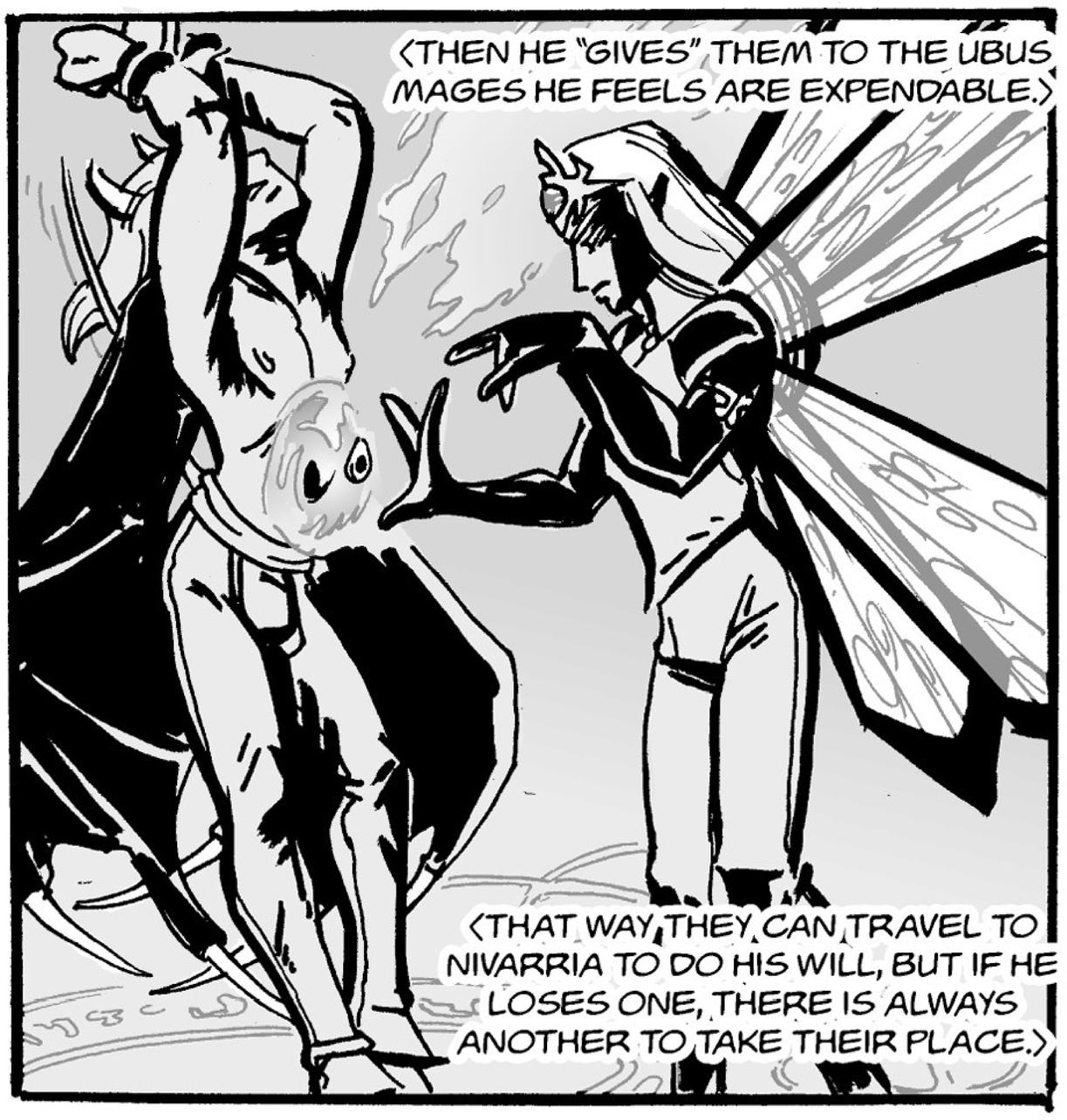

〈NO. THE LADY OF TIPPIKARRIE DOES.〉
〈SHE'S THE HIGH PRIESTESS OF KALISHKA.〉

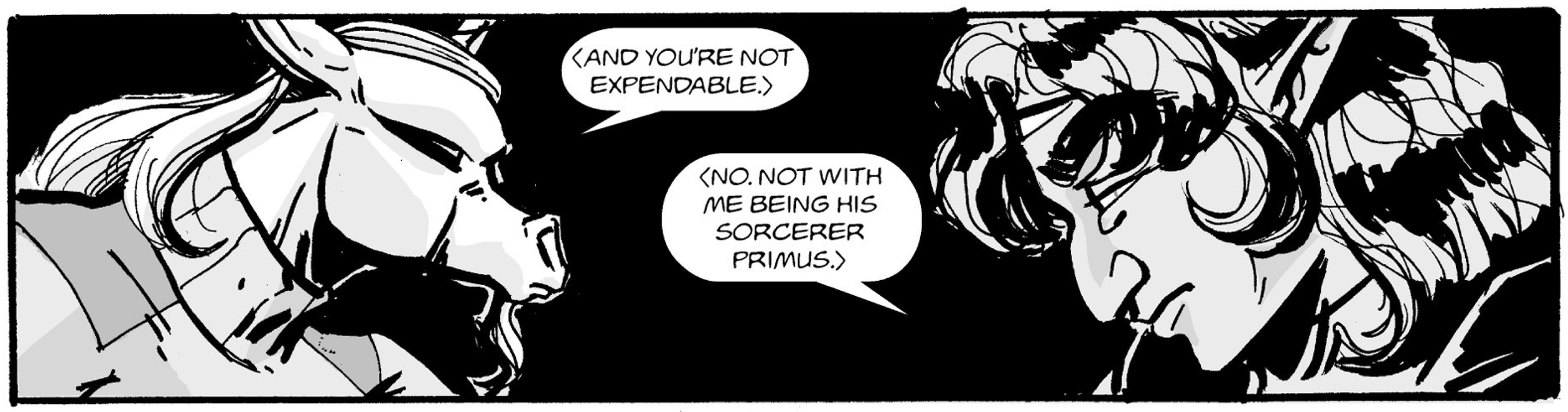

〈I'VE HAD TO DEAL WITH HER ONCE BEFORE.〉
〈ONE MOMENT SHE'S ALL SWEETNESS AND FLOWERS.〉


〈THE NEXT, SHE'S THE INCARNATION OF THE MAD-GODDESS HERSELF.〉


GREAT. A LOOSE CANNON.


〈SHEILBA TRADES LIVES TO HER FOR THE RUNES.〉


〈THEN HE "GIVES" THEM TO THE UBUS MAGES HE FEELS ARE EXPENDABLE.〉
〈THAT WAY, THEY CAN TRAVEL TO NIVARRIA TO DO HIS WILL, BUT IF HE LOSES ONE, THERE IS ALWAYS ANOTHER TO TAKE THEIR PLACE.〉


〈AND YOU'RE NOT EXPENDABLE.〉
〈NO. NOT WITH ME BEING HIS SORCERER PRIMUS.〉


⩥HUM⩤
〈SORCERER PRIMUS. SOUNDS PRETTY HIGH RANKING.〉
〈IT IS.〉
〈ARE YOU PRIVY TO A LOT OF WHAT LORD SHEILBA DOES?〉


〈UNFORTUNATELY. WHY DO YOU ASK?〉


〈ARE YOU WILLING TO TURN STATE'S EVIDENCE ON HIM?〉


〈I HAVE NO CLUE WHAT YOU JUST SAID.〉
〈ARE YOU WILLING TO STAND IN FRONT OF A MEGA-SHAMMARK JUDGE AND JURY, TELLING THEM ALL THAT SHEILBA'S DONE IN MY WORLD.〉
〈LIKE WHAT?〉


〈LIKE WHETHER OR NOT HE PLANS TO KILL HIS OWN SON.〉


〈YOU'RE ASKING ME TO TURN AGAINST MY LIEGE LORD.〉
〈ESSENTIALLY, YES.〉






〈CHILDREN ARE NOTHING BUT MISERY!〉


〈YES . . .〉
〈YES HE IS. AT SOME SORT OF CONCERT TOMORROW ON YOUR WORLD.〉
〈HE'S GOING HIMSELF TO SEE THE JOB DONE, BUT IS HAVING HIS PERSONAL GUARDS DO THE KILLING FROM A SNIPER POSITION.〉


〈THIS REALLY PUSHES UP THE TIMETABLE.〉
〈WE'VE GOT TO GET BACK TO MEGA-SHAMMARK A.S.A.P.〉

<WHY WOULD YOU CARE ABOUT HIS SON?>

<MURDER IS MURDER, TAHEE. SHARRDAN IS A CITIZEN OF MEGA-SHAMMARK. IT'S MY JOB TO PROTECT HIM.>

<YOU'RE A SOLDIER?>

<NO. I'M A POLICE OFFICER. I UPHOLD THE LAW.>

<BUT I CAN'T DO THAT IF I'M STUCK HERE.>

<RIGHT NOW IT SOUNDS LIKE GOING AFTER THE STONES ARE OUR ONLY OPTION.>

<HOLD ON.>

<DON'T YOU THINK I'VE TRIED?>

<I COULDN'T GET ANYWHERE NEAR THEM.>

<WHY NOT?>

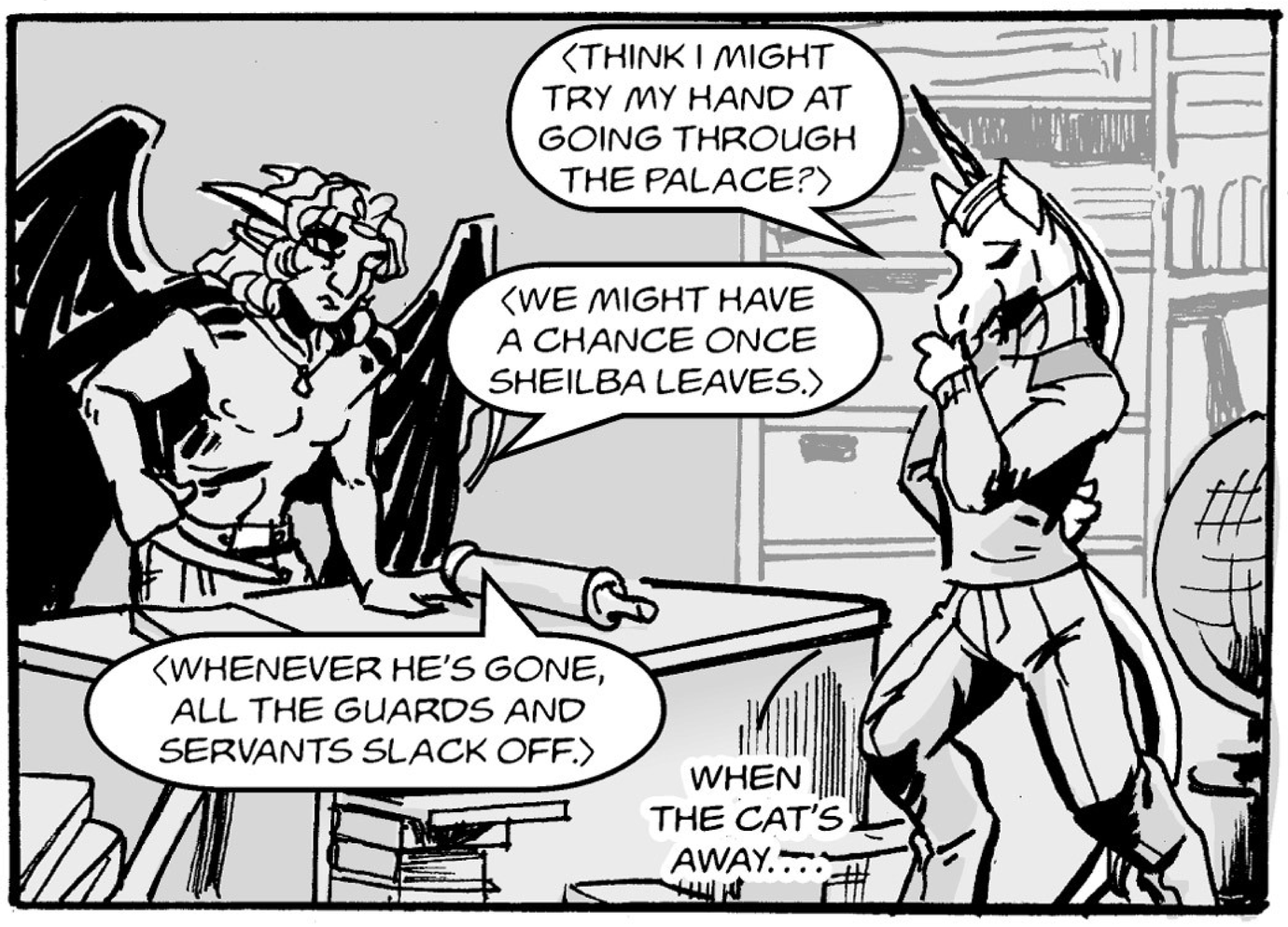
<SHEILBA'S GOT THEM HIDDEN VERY WELL COMPOUNDED WITH THE FACT THAT I'M VERY POOR AT SEEING MANA FIELDS.>

<I COMBED THE HIGH PALACE FOR MONTHS.>

<FOUND A *LOT* OF THINGS I WISHED I HADN'T BUT FOUND NO SIGN OF THE CRYSTALS.>

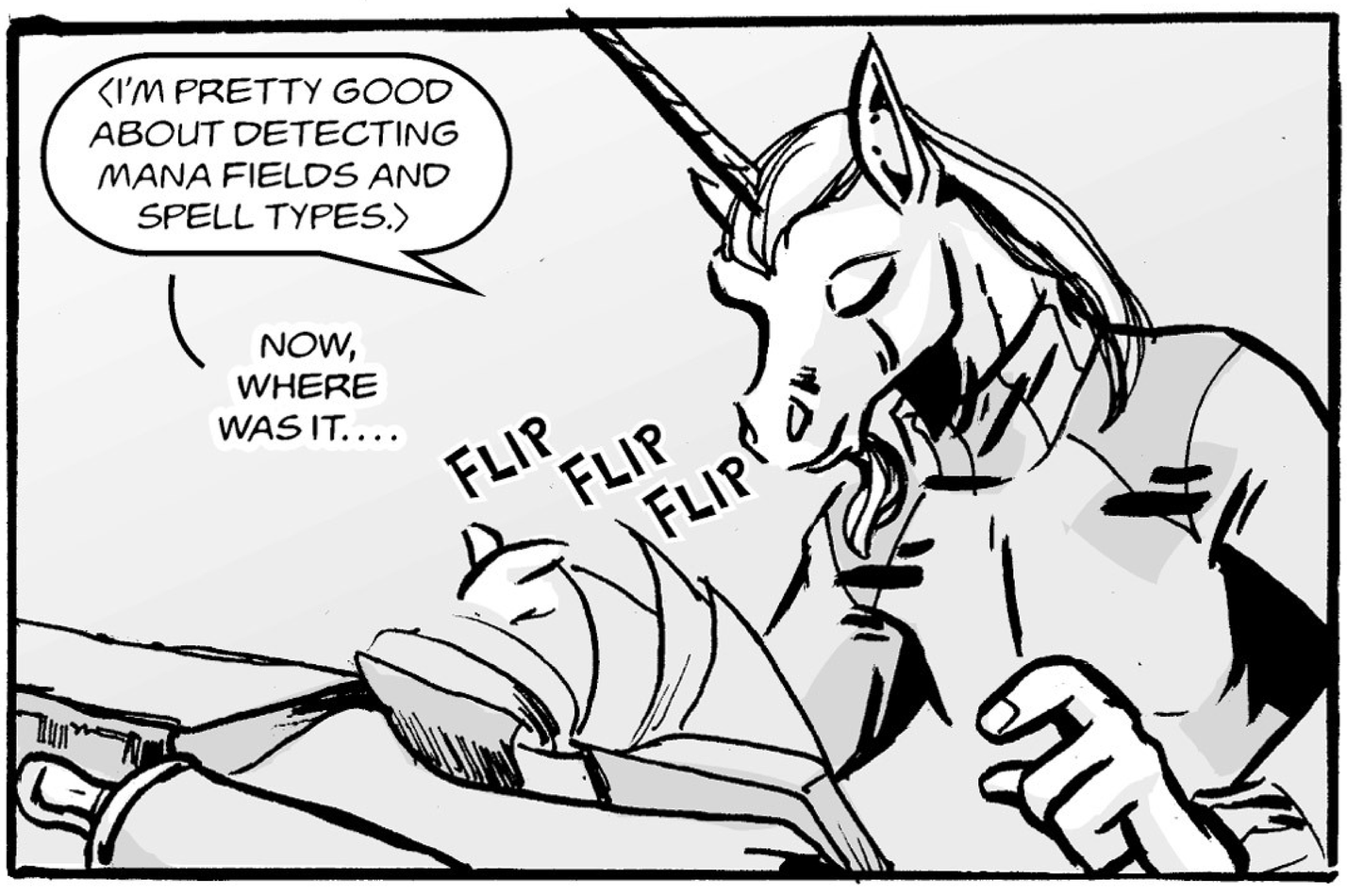
<HOW ABOUT THE LADY OF TIPPIKARIE'S STASH?>

<I MAY BE DESPERATE TO LEAVE, BUT I'M FAR FROM SUICIDAL. THE TEMPLE SHE LIVES IN IS TRAPPED AND GUARDED BY AN ANCIENT ARCH-MAGUS.>

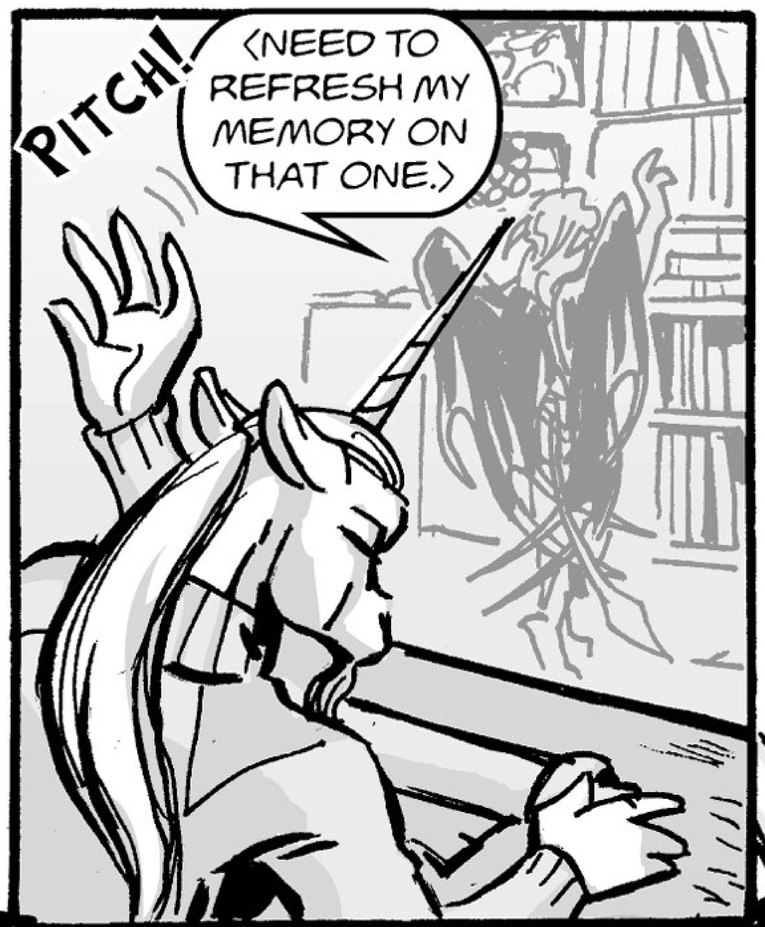

〈THINK I MIGHT TRY MY HAND AT GOING THROUGH THE PALACE?〉
〈WE MIGHT HAVE A CHANCE ONCE SHEILBA LEAVES.〉
〈WHENEVER HE'S GONE, ALL THE GUARDS AND SERVANTS SLACK OFF.〉
WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY....


〈IS HE LEAVING EARLY?〉


〈HE AND HIS ASSASSINS LEAVE BEFORE SLEEP. THAT WAY THEY HAVE TIME TO GET EVERYTHING INTO PLACE.〉
〈PERFECT!〉


〈I'M PRETTY GOOD ABOUT DETECTING MANA FIELDS AND SPELL TYPES.〉
NOW, WHERE WAS IT....
FLIP
FLIP
FLIP


〈HOW GOOD ARE YOU WITH INVISIBILITY?〉


PITCH!
〈NEED TO REFRESH MY MEMORY ON THAT ONE.〉


HUM.
〈ALL RIGHT. I GOT IT. WHAT ELSE DO WE NEED?〉


AH! HERE IT IS!

<WE NEED A TRUMP CARD TO PLAY IF WE GET CAUGHT.>

<IF YOU HAVE AN ADVANTAGE, USE IT.>

<OH, MY.>

<I'M GOING TO NEED A FEW SUPPLIES; PARCHMENT SLIPS, CRYSTAL INK AND THE LIKE.>

<I'VE GOT A FEW SPARE COMPONENT BAGS YOU CAN USE.>

<GREAT.>

<ALL RIGHT, IT'S DECIDED. WE'LL MEET YOU TWO IN THE VALLEY OF STONE EAST OF BYLON.>

<WITH LUCK, WE'LL HAVE THE RUNE CRYSTALS.>

<AMARK, YOU MIGHT WANT THIS BACK.>

<YOU STILL *HAVE* THAT?!

<I'D THOUGHT WE'D LOST THIS.>

<YOU'LL HAVE MORE USE FOR IT THAN I WILL.>

<ARE YOU GIRLS GOING TO BE SAFE TRAVELING THERE ON YOUR OWN?>

<STILL HAS A GOOD CHARGE TOO.>

<AMARK! WE'VE GONE OVER THIS ALREADY! WE'LL BE FINE.>


〈HOLLY AND I MAY NOT BE MAGES, BUT WE'RE NOT HELPLESS EITHER!〉


〈I'M MORE WORRIED ABOUT YOU GUYS.〉


DEAR?
HUM?
I WANT YOU TO PROMISE ME SOMETHING WHEN ALL OF THIS IS OVER.
AND THAT BEING?
DINNER AT THE VILLA MONTALVO.


AREN'T WE BEING PETTY?


〈COME ON, AMARK. WE NEED TO GO NOW IF WERE GOING TO MAKE THIS WORK!〉


YOU KNOW IT!

Oh, Mother Earth, release thy bonds.

And let my body be as if the world did not exist under me.

BREAK A LEG, YOU TWO.

<WE'VE ENTERED THE CITY LIMITS.>

<SO I SEE.>

<WITH ANY LUCK, THE GUARDS ARE STILL OUT HUNTING YOU.>

<IT'LL BE EASIER TO SNEAK YOU INTO MY QUARTERS UNTIL SHEILBA LEAVES.>

<I, AH, WOULDN'T COUNT ON THAT.>

<HANG ON TIGHT!>

EEK!

YANK!

<WAIT, TAHEE!>

UH-OH!

OH, THIS IS GOING TO HURT.

SMACK!

OUCH.

AMARK!

<ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?>

<I'M OKAY.>

<GET INSIDE, QUICK.>

CENTRIFUGAL FORCE IS NOT MY FRIEND.

<WE'RE IN. WHAT NEXT?>

<CAST INVISIBILITY ON ME, THEN WE START SEARCHING.>

CLICK

WOBBLE WOBBLE

BANG! BANG! BANG!

<SORCERER PRIMUS, YOUR PRESENCE IS REQUIRED IN THE MAIN HALL!>

<HOLD STILL.>

<Closed eyes to the world, absence of all senses. . .>

<DAMN.>

<I'LL BE RIGHT DOWN!>

<AND I'LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU.>

「WHERE IS SHE!」

〈I SUMMONED TARLOÖM HOURS AGO!〉

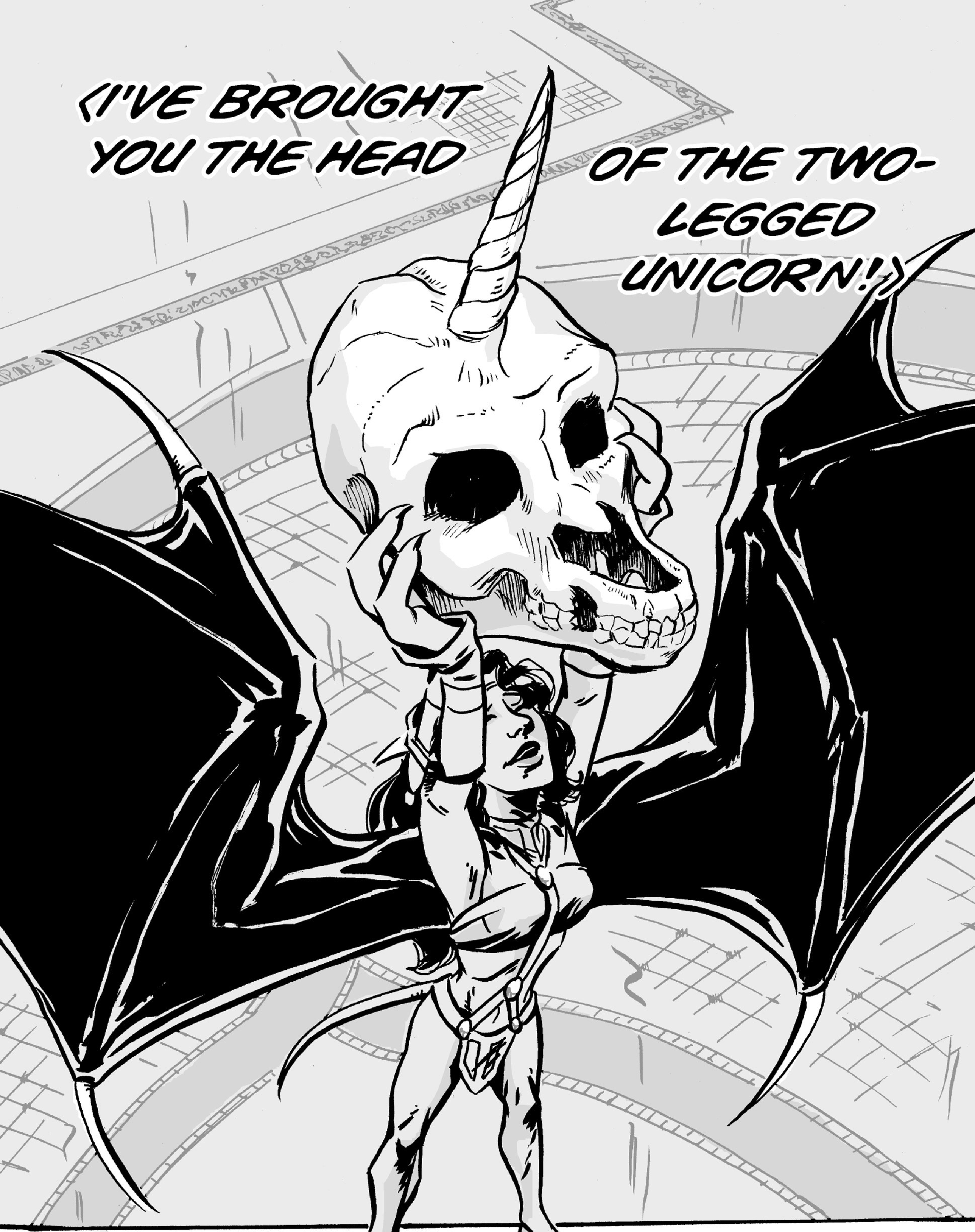
「WHERE IS SHE?!」

〈WE DON'T KNOW, MY LORD!〉

〈WE SAW HER LEAVE THE FIRESTORM BUT NOT WHERE SHE WENT TO.〉

〈MY LORD!〉

〈I HAVE IT!〉


(I'VE BROUGHT YOU THE HEAD OF THE TWO-LEGGED UNICORN!)
(BEAUTIFUL.)

The Demon City-state of Bylon

By Smudge and Dave Bryant

Bylon was already ancient when the Falshi came to the Demon Lands. Its easily defended site and mines in the nearby Valley of Stone made it an important source of raw materials and eventually a prosperous center of trade. This defensibility delayed its fall until late in the Falshi's campaign, and even then it was corruption (the Falshi's preferred method), not siegecraft, that took the city. The guilty doppelgängers had little time to enjoy the fruits of their betrayal, though, for the conquering Falshi's final reward was to put them to the sword along with all the others.

In the four millennia since, five of the functionally immortal Falshi have lorded over Bylon . . . only one of whom inherited the position. The rest secured it through assassination, including Sheilba, the fifth and current lord. For everyone else, as in so many of the pocket realms into which the Falshi shattered the old world-empire, Bylon's history to the present can be summed up in a single short phrase: things got worse. And there is little hope this trend will be reversed.

The Falshi and their conquered subjects are trapped in this doomed spiral by the former's inability to regard life as anything but a deadly serious game of King of the Hill and the latter's resentment and hatred of that ruthless, ultimately self-defeating game and its players. Even if the Falshi could turn over a new leaf at this stage, the Demon Lands would explode in a genocidal war of revenge and destruction the moment they loosened their iron grip.

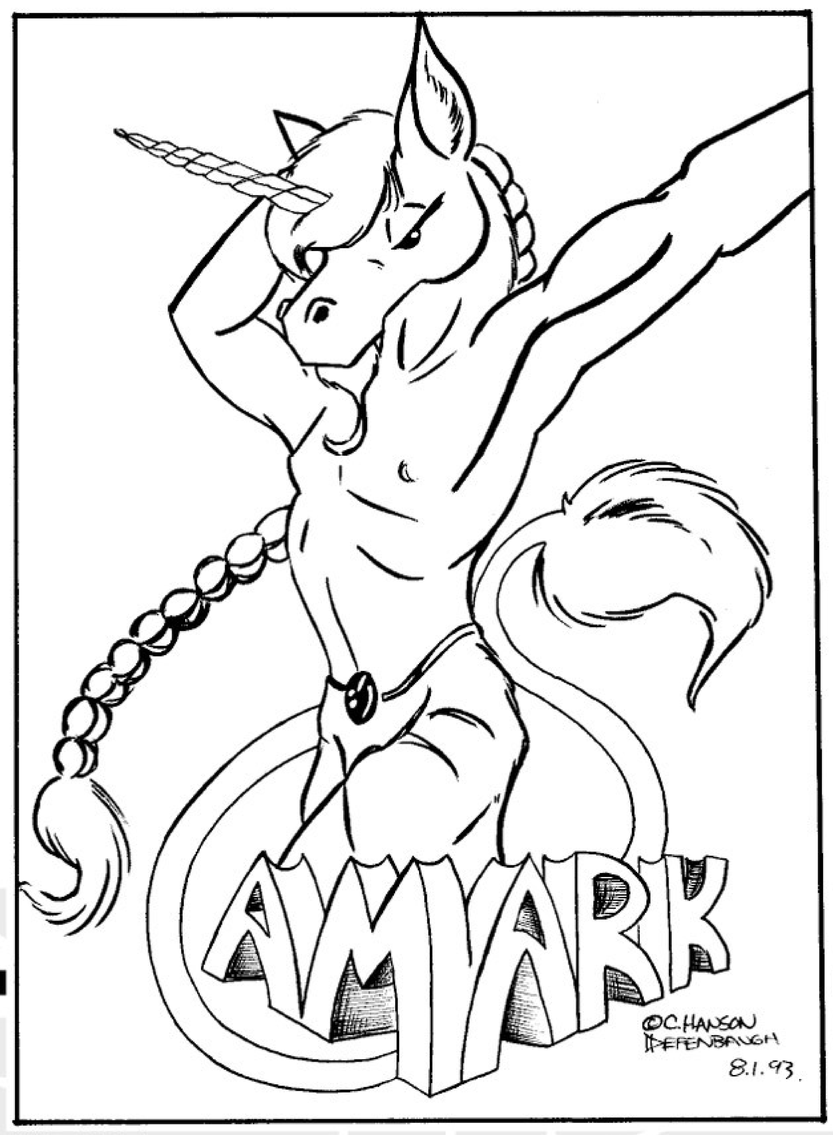
Ubi (such as Tarloöm, Tahee, and Körlorsha) and Stryers make up the bulk of Bylon's population, though several other Demon Lands species are represented in smaller numbers, including some Nightmares brought in to provide muscle for military, police, and commercial purposes. Notably absent, of course, are the reclusive (and very large) drakes, which tend to live far out in the wilderness, even in free fall near the poles.

Abject poverty is the rule for all but the very highest classes, and even they are not as wealthy as corresponding nobility of Nivarria once was. Credit is unknown and, while cash in the form of precious-metal coins circulates freely among the nobility, barter becomes increasingly common as one slides down the social ladder. Daily survival is desperate enough that even barter is nearly always for goods in hand rather than labor, favors, or other semi-abstract exchanges.

The city itself is crowded and close. Most buildings are two to three stories, usually built wall to wall, and flat-roofed to accommodate flyers. As well, arcades and porches jut out everywhere, for similar reasons or simply to provide more space, and there are many through archways. Aside from the finely built and maintained stone villas on the modest heights—which belong to the Falshi and their important retainers—and scattered remnants from the Doppelgänger era, the vast majority of the buildings huddled within the city walls are of adobe, straw, and other cheap, plentiful materials, and are ill-kept with slap-dash repairs. Sprawling outside those walls is a ramshackle shantytown without even the alleys winding through the city wherever the buildings don't touch, let alone the broad boulevards. Those boulevards are kept relatively open and clear by the residents, who police them aggressively, if informally.

As with most of the Demon Lands, the major religion is worship of Kalishka. She was originally an earth-mother figure, and the world is seen as her womb. Since the incursion of the Falshi, she has become the warped and nihilistic Mad Goddess. This is not accidental; there is no separation of church and state in the Demon Lands, and the Falshi rulers are thus also the priestly class. Moreover, it is to their advantage to provide an outlet for their subjects' tensions—and provide it Kalishka does.

Sophont sacrifice is merely the most pedestrian of current unpleasant practices and views. The end of the world will come not with an uplifting transition to a higher existence, but in bloody, painful destruction, a back-alley abortion on a massive scale. Barring drastic and thorough outside intervention, the Falshi's toxic mix of feudalism, social Darwinism, and general rapacity will inevitably bring this vision to pass, ending in a barren, dusty wasteland.



BEWARE the TWO-LEGGED UNICORN for HE SHALL BE NO HEALER,
FEAR the BEING with ONE HORN, & the DESTRUCTION that EXISTED in HIS WAKE.
THE WORLD SHALL PETRIFY & DIE SCREAMING UNDER HIS HOOVES
AS HE AND HIS HERD STRIDE ACROSS THE LAND,
SLAUGHTERING THE GODDESS AS THEY GO.



AND THOSE WHO ARE RIGHTEOUS
SHALL CEASE TO BE AS IF THEY
HAD NEVER BEEN BORN.